

Hopkirk, Peter. *The Great Game. On Secret Service in High Asia*. London: John Murray, 1990.

For nearly one hundred years, from 1810 to 1907, the British and Russian empires moved slowly towards each other along the north-west frontier of India. The Great Game, as this Central Asian rivalry was called, was the stuff both of international politics and of popular fiction throughout the nineteenth century.

In many ways, however, the story of the Great Game is the tale of individual adventure. With both Britain and Russia wanting detailed knowledge of the inhospitable and inaccessible lands separating their imperial holdings, intrepid individuals were sent to spy out the land. The need for information was particularly acute after 1807, when Napoleon proposed a joint Franco-Russian invasion of India. In 1810, the British East India Company sent two such of its officers to determine the possible invasion routes. While the Russian threat eased in the 1820s, British agents moved steadily forward. In the 1830s, Lieutenant Alexander Burnes reached Bokhara.

In the period from 1860 to 1900, the Great Game became one less of individual daring and more one of concentrated imperial enterprise. As the Russians advanced across Central Asia, trailing behind them the railroads that ended the logistical edge which Britain had always enjoyed through the sea routes to India, the defence of India became the major military pre-occupation of the British government. Thus, a bevy of spies were sent across the north-west frontier of India. Their aim was to provide early warning of a Russian advance and the geographic information necessary to combat it. Equally, these men were charged with countering the attempts of Russian emissaries to obtain favorable concessions from the rulers of such places as Afghanistan, Persia and Tibet. This struggle for the support of the native population lasted until the end of the Great Game itself, with Francis Younghusband's overzealous attempt to bind Tibet to Britain in 1904 being the last of them. In 1907, Britain and Russia signed a convention defining their interests in the region, bringing an end to nearly a century of conflict and intrigue.

Peter Hopkirk has not attempted to write an academic monograph on this intriguing subject. Instead, what he has created is a gripping story of the individual adventurers -- British and Russian -- who played the Great Game. The book is based on memoir accounts, the extensive secondary literature and unattributed material from the Political and Secret files in the India Office Library and Records. The result is popular history at its finest: entertaining, discriminating and likely to draw a wide audience. For professional historians, Hopkirk provides an excellent overview of the subject and one that students can be referred to with confidence. While his sub-title suggests that Hopkirk will discuss intelligence matters, he fails in this regard. There is no real discussion of just how much information was gathered by the sundry British agents in the region, how this information was interpreted at Simla or

in Whitehall and whether policy was formed on its basis. Nonetheless, this is an enjoyable and worthwhile book.

Keith Neilson
Royal Military College of Canada

Burgess, William H., III, ed. *Inside Spetsnaz: Soviet Special Operations - A Critical Analysis*. Novato, CA: Presidio, 1990.

It is a telling statement on the rapidly changing nature of the global strategic situation that when this book was published, the Soviet Union and its armed forces still existed, but had dissolved by the time this review was published. While that fact may diminish the volume's immediate currency, the subject it explores retains considerable historical interest and value for the student of the Soviet armed forces and its successors.

The authors of *Inside Spetsnaz* clearly would empathize with the Soviet military correspondent whose article, "A Posting to *Spetsnaz*", appeared in a military magazine in 1990.¹ The article was an effort to explain to a confused letter writer and to readers generally what "real" *Spetsnaz* are and the kinds of actions they undertake. The author underscored the "fragmented, unclear, and contradictory" information associated with the topic. He acknowledged a Soviet military love for the prefix "*spets*" (special), pointing to the existence of "special" troops like chemical, highway and pipeline units; the use of terms like "special services" (*spetsobsluzhivanie*), "special equipment" (*spetsoborudovanie*), and "special designation" (*spetsnaznachenie* – the source of the contraction *spetsnaz*); and the creation of Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) *spetsnaz* subunits and "even" MVD militia detachments of special (*osobyi*) designation (the now-famous OMON). All of these, he suggested, were most often lumped together by the press.

This Soviet author, no doubt still limited by security considerations, did his best to address what he called "real army *spetsnaz*" intended for operations in the deep rear of the enemy, and in a narrow sense did add to the public knowledge. However, for a broad understanding of the richness and complexity of Soviet special operations theory and practice, the reader should go to *Inside Spetsnaz*, the most successful effort thus far to assess the history and development of Soviet special operations forces. The book sets itself the task of correcting the many misunderstandings and fictions surrounding Soviet special operations, while providing context, sources, and guidance to scholars and military specialists doing research in this important area of Soviet security studies.

Inside Spetsnaz meets this goal through the extensive use of Soviet primary source writings (rarely used by most writers on this topic); the selection of contributors from a variety of pertinent military, intelligence, and